

Interview with RADM Robert Higgins, Deputy Surgeon General, USN

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Let's talk a little bit about your background and how you started out and why you decided to join the Navy.

I didn't start out by with the intention of being a Navy man. Initially, I went to college to study automotive engineering and switched to philosophy and then finally graduated in pharmacy. Then I went off and practiced as a pharmacist for a couple of years in Washington and purchased what had been my parents' drugstore in Pullman. I was married and had a child. We were all settled and had a house. Then, I got this wild idea that I wanted to be a doctor.

While I had the store in Pullman, I took some pre-med courses at Washington State University. I then applied to medical school and was accepted at the University of Washington. So, we made the decision to leave the pharmacy and Pullman to go to Seattle for medical school. I finished that and went to Los Angeles County Harvard General Hospital for my post-graduate training in 1965.

At this time, Vietnam was beginning to heat up. I finished [post-graduate training] in 1966 and was drafted. By this time, I was married and had three children, but doctors were prime targets for drafting. Truthfully, I didn't mind because the federal government helped me through medical school. So, I really felt as if I had an obligation to pay that back and I'm patriotic anyway.

I was actually drafted in the Army and received a set of orders from the Army, however, I did do a little footwork and found out the name and telephone number of the person who allocated positions to the different services. I called him and discovered they had one spot for the Navy that month. I said I'd like to take it. After asking me what school I went to, he said that would be fine. So, he penciled me in for the Navy and soon afterwards I got orders for the Navy. That's how I got in the Navy rather than the Army.

I guess the reason I wanted the Navy, and probably the best decision I made for the military, was that my father had been a pharmacist's mate for the Navy in World War I and had made 20 round trip crossings of the Atlantic in a troop ship. I was really proud of that. So, the Navy was the service I wanted to serve in.

Where was your first set of orders to?

The first set of orders was to go to Coronado Island for orientation for six months. I was in the middle of orientation when I was called out and told that something had happened to the medical officer I was supposed to relieve on the USS Tutuila (ARG-4) so I needed to leave right away. Therefore, before I finished orientation, they sent me over to Vietnam.

It took a while to find the ship. I didn't realize that the Navy didn't send you to your ship. They just gave me a ticket to Clarke Field in the Philippines. I got there and realized I wouldn't find the ship there. I found a few other sailors that were headed to the Tutuila who I got to shepherd around since I was the only officer. We got to Subic Bay and then found some gear on the dock destined for the Tutuila. An oiler, USS Tolibon came along to pick it up and we got a ride.

Were you the senior medical officer on the Tutuila?

I spent a year on the Tutuila as the ship's surgeon. Actually, I was the only medical officer. In fact, I was the only Navy medical officer in the Mekong Delta.

What kind of sick bay did you have on the ship?

We had an operating room and a fair amount of equipment, but no gas anesthesia. We also had an examining room that could be used for minor surgery. We also had an 8-bed ward and a pharmacy and a lab, which were fairly rudimentary. Our medical department consisted of myself and eight corpsmen, a dentist, and two dental technicians.

I guess you did your share of surgery abroad the Tutuilla?

Just a few days after I got aboard ship we were inundated with casualties from an ambushed Green Beret operation. There were about 57 casualties. We had virtually no way to air evacuate them out of there as we were 50 miles off the coast of Vietnam and a long ways from Saigon. So, we operated pretty steadily for a number of hours. Thank Dennis for the good training that the corpsmen get because my chief happened to be an OR technician. Rather than have him help me in the operating room, I had the dentist there, and I had the chief taking care of people with extremity bullet wounds. And everybody survived that who got a bullet alive. So, we did well in that regard.

So, your corpsmen could do things like chest tubes, etc.?

We didn't have to do a lot of that. I think that they probably could, but it didn't come to that. But the corpsmen certainly took care of a lot of injuries and wounds. They were very talented people. There was a corpsman with the Special Operations people, UDTs, who was so good I was almost intimidated by his medical knowledge.

But, you didn't stay on the ship all the time?

No, as the only Navy medical officer in the Mekong Delta, I spent a lot of time aboard small craft and helicopters flying around to see the Navy advisors to the Vietnamese Navy and Vietnamese Marines and to do Medcaps.

I got involved in what was called the Wanno operation which was winning the hearts and minds operation--a psychological warfare operation. We would go into a village in a known Vietcong stronghold and provide medical care, food, and to help restore buildings and so forth. It was a very successful operation.

What type of care did you provide personally during these Wanno operations?

It was hard to give any on-going care in that situation. If there was any acute medical issues, you could treat it. But we didn't want to pass out a lot of medicine because we knew it would end up in the hands of the Vietcong. That area was friendly during the daytime and occupied by the Vietcong at night. Nevertheless, there were some things we could help. We operated with the Vietnamese Navy so that if we gave the villagers anything--bandages, little medicine--we did it via a Vietnamese Navy person so that they could understand that it was their own people helping to give this care. We were just there helping them.

I had one interesting experience. In fact, it was the first Wanno trip that we went on in the little village down by the Number 37 Jump Force Base. It was in Kien Hoa Province which was really the stronghold of Vietcong. We went into this village by helicopter. In most of the villages we went to the people would crowd around to get medical care and so forth. In this village, everybody was standing back and it worried us very much. Then, we saw two fellows carrying an elderly lady on two poles, as a kind of stretcher, coming down the street. She was acutely short of breath and a little cyanotic. I thought we may be in trouble. It turned out that she was having an acute asthma attack. I gave her some medicine intravenously to break

up the attack. After about 20 minutes, she was breathing fine and was able to walk. After that, the people absolutely deluged us for medical care. That day, many weapons were turned in by the villagers as part of the Cho Hoi program (the friendly turnover to the Vietnamese).

What other medical people did you have on these tours?

The dentists went with me and we took corpsmen with us. It was not required for the corpsmen to go but I think every one of my corpsmen volunteered. So, we took turns. We'd take about 2 or 3 corpsmen, a dentist and a dental tech. The dentists provided a tremendous service. The Vietnamese villagers really had never seen a dentist and had a lot of dental problems.

Did you ever do repeats on the villages?

Yes. We went back to a number of villages a second and third time. But it was hard to give on-going care particularly, as I mentioned before, with the medication. They are wonderful people though. Their literacy level was higher than our country at the time. Most of them were bi-lingual or tri-lingual.